

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 355 822

FL 021 091

AUTHOR Wooden, Sharon L.; Hurley, Sandra R.
TITLE Bilingual (Spanish and English) Adults: Achieving Literacy in the First Language.
PUB DATE Nov 92
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Arizona Educational Research Organization (Phoenix, AZ, November 1992).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Basic Education; *Bilingualism; Case Studies; College Students; Curriculum Development; English (Second Language); Higher Education; Interviews; *Language Maintenance; *Literacy Education; *Native Language Instruction; *Reading Processes; *Spanish

ABSTRACT

In response to problems encountered in teaching Spanish to native speakers who had learned Spanish as their first (oral) language but because of their schooling were literate only in English, a study was conducted to explore issues related to development of native-language literacy skills after acquisition of second-language literacy. Two adult university students, both first-generation Americans who spoke Spanish at home but gained literacy skills only in English, were interviewed concerning their literacy learning and language background. This information was analyzed in the context of relevant research literature on language loss and shift, language maintenance, and reading processes. Findings in these areas are outlined, with reference to excerpts of interviews with the subjects. Both students had experienced native language loss due to both cultural and demographic influences, primarily all-English schooling and contact with English-speaking children, and expressed their own and family members' disappointment at that phenomenon. Language loyalty and migration patterns are seen as important factors in language maintenance. The subjects used English reading skills to learn to read in Spanish. It is suggested that teachers of Spanish to native speakers provide meaningful learning activities in a supportive climate, a developmental approach to instruction, and instruction that validates native culture, and literature by same-culture authors. The story of one of the students, written by herself, is appended. (MSE)

* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *

ED355822

BILINGUAL (SPANISH AND ENGLISH) ADULTS: ACHIEVING LITERACY
IN THE FIRST LANGUAGE

Sharon L. Wooden, Ed.D
Sandra R. Hurley, M.A.

Department of Curriculum & Instruction
New Mexico State University
Box 3CUR
Las Cruces, NM 88003

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the
Arizona Educational Research Organization
Phoenix, November 1992

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

- This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it
 Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality

- Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Sharon L.
Wooden

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

This study began with a request from a professor in the Department of Languages and Linguistics to the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at New Mexico State University. Instructors teaching Spanish for Native Speakers (SNS) Courses indicated a need for curricular improvement in the reading and writing component of their program.

PROBLEM

The SNS coordinator saw their problem as three-fold:

- 1) Even though placement tests were given, student literacies were on a continuum from barely functional to clearly superior thus making scope and sequencing problematic.
- 2) While the instructors were dedicated professionals and knowledgeable in their field, they were not knowledgeable about the reading process or the pedagogy of literacy acquisition.
- 3) After two semesters, students were expected to be ready for advanced level Spanish reading and literature courses; however many had difficulty and professors of the advanced courses complained.

As a doctoral student pursuing a degree in reading, I was intrigued with the prospect of studying literacy acquisition from this unique perspective because most work in the area has been done with very young children or adult illiterates not with highly literate college students learning to read and write their first language. An agreement was reached whereby reading professors and I would carry out a study.

DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the study was to provide program improvement and

simultaneously explore issues related to the reading process as students in the classes developed literacy. My intent was to stimulate the reconstruction of the participants' experiences regarding learning to read and write in Spanish.

Participants

The participants of this pilot portion of the study had learned Spanish as their first (oral) language at home. In school they were taught in an all-English curriculum. Therefore, they developed both oral and written skills in the second language only. Both participants were first generation Americans. Bertha's mother is a native of Mexico, her father is Puerto Rican. She is a 33 year old female majoring in sociology. Bertha was born and grew up in a large metropolitan city on the United States/Mexico border. Mary's parents were born in Mexico. Mary is a 44 year old female majoring in elementary/bilingual education. She spent her first 12 years in a small farming community in the Rio Grande Valley. Her family then moved to a nearby urban area. Additional relevant information about each participant will be given in their own words below. All names used are pseudonyms.

Procedure

Initially I spoke to a SNS class and briefly outlined the research project. Twenty-seven students expressed interest in telling their stories and volunteered to participate. Two names were randomly selected and contacted by telephone; both agreed to be interviewed. Three, ninety minute indepth interviews using Seidman's (1991) model were conducted with each participant. The first interview centered around the question, "How did you come to be enrolled in this course and what experiences led to your decision to study Spanish as an adult?" The second

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

interview focused on the participant's experiences while in the class relative to acquiring literacy in their mother tongue. The third and final interview explored what these experiences meant to the participant.

The interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed by me. The interviews were conducted in English, however, both participants used Spanish occasionally. Sometimes they chose to immediately translate what they said into English. Other times they simply used Spanish terms and continued uninterrupted. A colleague who is fluent in Spanish and English checked those portions of the transcripts for accuracy.

Analysis of Data

A literature review was begun before and continued during data collection and analysis. The transcripts were read and reread. First I simply read them and marked any passage that was interesting. Then I looked at them for material specifically about reading and writing. I marked all such passages. There was a great deal marked as interesting that had little or nothing to do with reading. I thought of Marshall's (1985) description of this winnowing process and how one can lose confidence in being able to sort out what is important. I found that my background in reading theory was insufficient because so much more was involved than just adults learning to read and write. The issues were complex and intricately intertwined.

Next I crafted a narrative profile of one of the participants. This was done by condensing her interview material (63 single-spaced pages) to five pages of verbatim transcript. A copy of "Mary's Story" is attached as Appendix A.

After working through the condensation process, I felt more confident about the "interesting" passages I had marked earlier. The patterns and

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

connections became clearer. In both the literature and transcripts compelling themes unrelated to the reading process were apparent, among them: language loss, shift, and maintenance.

The transcripts were read again and excerpts marked, coded, and placed in separate computer files by category. I went back to my notes from the literature and it was amazing how the experiences of these participants fit with what was written in the literature once I stopped trying to relate everything to reading and writing experiences. In the Results section below, I attempt to connect information from the literature with Mary and Bertha's experiences.

RESULTS

Results from my reading in the thematic areas and pertinent parts of the interviews are discussed below.

Language Loss/Shift

Language death/loss can occur at either the societal or individual level. In both instances it is a process, usually encompassing at least three generations (Fishman, 1966). Mary spoke directly regarding this generational shift:

My parents were both from Mexico. At home we were always speaking Spanish until [I was in] fifth grade.... I started speaking English. The rest of my brothers and sisters did too. The first language my children learned was English. My daughter can speak [Spanish] and write it a little. My son can't. He can understand [some]; he can't speak it much less write it. My grandchildren--they'll be swallowed into the English language I'm sure.

The language loss of the participants were influenced by both demographic and cultural factors, primarily by schooling in an all-English curriculum and by playing with English-speaking children:

(Mary) I didn't speak any English... They placed me in kindergarten. I don't know how I got by.... I don't remember [the teacher] speaking any Spanish at all... I know that we weren't allowed to speak Spanish at school... By first grade I understood and spoke English... My friends would come to my home or I would go to theirs and they were always speaking English and so I started speaking English more.

(Bertha) I went into the classroom and I didn't understand anything because I did not understand the English language... Once I learned the alphabet, I started reading in English... I started picking up a lot [of English} that was used on the playground...and that is why I started losing [my Spanish].

The participants expressed their feelings and the feelings of family members regarding the loss:

(Mary) I'd like them to know Spanish, my grandchildren. And I regret not speaking to my son in Spanish. I really do.

(Bertha) My aunts commented that I did not speak Spanish as well as I used to. I didn't like that. My aunts were saying, "You know you used to speak a very beautiful Spanish but now you don't." It was [becoming] very difficult for me to communicate orally with them.

Language attrition is referred to by Trudgill (1984) as "creolization in reverse." According to Silva-Covalán (1990), this description "captures the observation that while certain pidgins and creoles move toward a higher number of grammatical distinctions, in language loss the reverse is true," (p. 165). Both participants exhibited this as children, in Bertha's words:

We would take Spanish endings and add them onto English words in order for my mother to understand. Instead of saying, "?Quiero ver la television?" I would say, "?Quero watcha la television?" Instead of saying, "Miraste esto," I'd say, "Watchastas esto" for "Did you see this?"

Language Maintenance

The social, cultural, and political exigencies leading to language loss are

intertwined with and are sometimes, paradoxically, the very forces that lead to language maintenance. For example, schooling children in English while parents use only the native language begins the generational shift toward language two. On the other hand, bilingual children of monolingual parents often become "cultural brokers -- translators and negotiators for parents" (Delgado-Gaitan & Trueba, 1991, p.81) thus establishing the need for maintenance of language one. Bertha was often in the position of cultural broker:

I would interpret for my Mother because she was only Spanish speaking. When she had to deal with business people I was always along and in charge of interpreting for her. If she had a problem with a bill or something, then I was the one who was responsible for going to talk to the person and explaining. [I] translated the instructions she gave me to English for the salesperson or whomever and then translated the response back to Spanish for her.

Language shifts/loss and resistance to them go on wherever languages impinge on one another. Language loyalty is usually the catalyst that prompts language maintenance (Fishman, 1966). The participants of this study reveal factors of personal and ethnic identity which influence language loyalty:

(Mary) It just makes me feel prouder. I don't feel bad saying I'm Mexican because I am -- my roots are from Mexico. I am Mexican American... It means becoming a complete person learning to write Spanish correctly and to read my spanish and not be ashamed because I can't do it right.

(Bertha) Spanish would predominate in social events with the family. If we went to the movies we would go to a theater that would show movies in Spanish. If we went to a party or something, it was always with Hispanic families so Spanish was used. Music, it was Spanish, radio stations in Spanish, television stations in Spanish, newspapers in Spanish.

"U.S. Spanish illustrates both maintenance (at the societal level) and shift to English (at the individual or family level)" (Silva-Corvalán, 1990, p. 165). Spanish in the United States differs from other areas of language loss because of

continuous contact with immigrants from Mexico and other Spanish speaking countries. While language loyalty may be one factor in maintenance, Elias-Olivares, González-Widel, and Vargas (n.d.) note the stable use of Spanish in a Chicago Mexican American community "is reinforced by the circulatory migration patterns of Mexican Americans between Chicago and Mexico, and by the increasing need to interact with more recent immigrants and a large population of Puerto Ricans, Central and South Americans living in other areas of Chicago." Additionally, Delgado-Gaitan and Trueba (1991) note in their ethnographic study of a California community, that culture and language are maintained through the migration cycle of Spanish speakers from Mexico. I hypothesize that this is also true in the Las Cruces/El Paso area and that the proximity of the international border reinforces the stable use of Spanish. This hypothesis is supported by Bertha's experiences:

One of my uncles lived in Juarez, Mexico so we always used to go visit. We visited my grandparents [who] were living in a small community outside of Ciudad Chihuahua. We would spend the two and half or three months that we had for summer vacation there.

Since El Paso is a border town, we would cross into Juarez and go there to the mercado, to the marketplace....

At the hospital where I worked there were always patients from Mexico and Central America who needed someone to translate for them. I translated a lot at the bank also, where I worked, because we had international customers from the interior of Mexico.

Reading Process

It is believed the linguistic cuing systems (semantic, syntactic, graphophonic, and pragmatic) and the processing strategies (selective sampling, predicting, confirming, and integrating) (Goodman, Watson, & Burke, 1987) are the

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

same whether one is reading in a first or second language (Barrera, 1992). That the participants used what they knew about reading in English to learn to read Spanish is evident:

(Bertha) I could figure out the word just by phonetically sounding it out and then by reading the context of the sentence. I did not receive any training in Spanish. I received books and magazines.... [When] I was in high school I had a Spanish/English dictionary so I would look the words up. But through the elementary grades I just read a lot... What helped with my vocabulary was that we saw a lot of television in Spanish as well as English.

(Mary) I started reading my Bible with [my husband] and going to his church; it was bilingual but mostly Spanish. We would read the Bible in Spanish. My husband said, "All you have to do is say it and write it the way it sounds."

This study, even though limited in scope to two participants, lends weight to the notion that there are universals in the reading process. Both of the participants taught themselves to read and write Spanish after acquiring literacy in English. Bertha did that as a child; Mary as an adult. Later, each enrolled in the Spanish for Native Speakers course to develop and fine tune their skills.

CONCLUSIONS

Implications for teachers of Spanish for native speakers courses, based on reading theory and the experiences of these participants include:

1) The importance of meaningful learning activities in a supportive climate with a teacher who cares. Literacy acquisition for college students, like young children, appears to be facilitated by a print-rich environment, that promotes risk-taking, collaborative learning, and provides a variety of oral and written language experiences that are perceived by the students as real not exercises.

(Bertha) I was disappointed because I thought the book was too elementary. Some of the exercises were a little

bit patronizing. I didn't think they were written for adults... I wanted to do more reading and more thinking. I wanted more literature. I wanted the rules, but I wanted the opportunity to write more and to converse more in Spanish... Mrs. Baca realized the deficiency of the book. She would bring in magazines or newspapers. She lent me a couple of books also. They were a challenge...

Sometimes she will introduce a controversial subject and ask our opinion, the rules are that we speak in Spanish only... Some are very puzzled. We learn a lot from each other. And great projects! Most of them are oral presentations but we also have to do a written synopsis of the articles we read. They're based on our actual career goals. For instance I will be assigned to the other social work students. Together we will come up with a case history or an actual incident that would occur to present. I'm really excited about that. She incorporates the curriculum into our real world.

(Mary) We have a textbook. We have dictation every Friday. Now I'm learning where the acentos go so it's not so bad.

We're having presentations. I did mine on a teaching lesson that I was going to do in a bilingual class. My Spanish class helped me because I did it there first and I realized after talking with the rest of the students that some of the children would not understand. So I went home [and improved] the lesson. One young man in class is studying to be a doctor so he chose something in his field which was very interesting.

2) Adopting a developmental approach to instruction. One can start with the assumption that "bilingual Hispanic students do not begin their study of Spanish at point zero... their entry skills can be ranked along a continuum" (Valdés, 1989, p.395). In the present study Bertha observed that students were at:

All levels! A lot of the people in the class said they spoke Spanish first... but they haven't used the skill and now they are going out into the business world and must speak it correctly. Some are coming in from Mexico or speak Spanish all the time at home, they have a greater facility. Some are at a very elementary level; use a lot of slang words; have not taken the time to read or develop the language and they are just starting to do

so now... I think they are struggling... We have from one extreme to the other extreme and some that are right in the middle.

3) The works of Erickson (1982), Coulthard and Sinclair (1974), and Au and Mason (1981) show the impact of family culture, and peer group on learners (Ruddell & Speaker, 1985). As Mary said, "My roots are in Mexico. I am Mexican American." Out of two different cultures has emerged a unique Mexican American culture that needs to be validated and recognized. Spanish for native speakers courses are in an especially good position to aid this validation and recognition process by enhancing the positive impact of family, culture, and peer group on learners.

4) Related to validation of Mexican American students' experiences and alluded to in the reading process section above, is the importance of providing literature by Mexican American authors -- not just literature by Spanish and Latin American writers -- for students to read, discuss, and respond to. Mary related strongly to writers who had shared similar childhood experiences in English-only elementary schools. Bertha said she was "hungering" for more reading and writing.

SUMMARY

Mary and Bertha summarized their experiences about finally acquiring literacy in their mother tongue this way:

(Mary) It means becoming a complete person, learning to write Spanish correctly and to read my Spanish and not be ashamed because I can't do it right. And it means being able to help little Mexican American children so maybe they will have better experiences in school than I did.

(Bertha) In just a few words it means self-development for myself, empowerment for myself and others like me, and being able to give to others.... The richness of it --

it's not just a language; it's not just a different accent; it's not just a different word -- it's a whole history of people. The language is people. The way we communicate, the way we dress, the hurts, the growth, the culture, it's the roots of who we are.

The participants were aware of a new critical consciousness, a sense of empowerment, and spiritual and emotional growth resulting from Spanish literacy. These are widely recognized benefits of literacy acquisition; they were powerful benefits to Bertha and Mary as they finally developed reading and writing fluency in their mother tongue.

I began this study simply to look at a unique population of emergent readers and writers and to help a group of teachers develop a more effective reading program. I found there was nothing simple about the study. The questions that arose during it were far more profound and interesting than those I began with. I found that qualitative research can be incredibly time-consuming and tedious but also incredibly valuable and meaningful. Perhaps the most important thing I learned is the need for understanding the experiences of others. In ways that numbers can never show, hearing another person's story lets us, to some degree, relive their life with them. It seems to me that we need to hear the stories of students like Bertha and Mary. Maybe we need to take time hear all of our students' stories.

I found many more questions than answers. Because of that, this study is continuing. A language/literacy survey was administered to 135 students in SNS classes this semester. Classroom observations are being conducted. More interviews are planned. I do not know where or when it will end nor do I know what we will find along the way; I doubt that it will be simple answers.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

REFERENCES

- Au, K., and Mason, J.M. (1981). Social organizational factors in learning to read. *Reading Research Quarterly, 17*, 115-152.
- Barrera, R.B. (1992). *Literacy education of linguistic minorities*. Unpublished lecture notes. New Mexico State University.
- Coulthard, R.M. & Sinclair, J.M. (1975). *Towards an analysis of English used by teachers and pupils*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Delgado-Gaitan, C. & Trueba, H.T. (1991). *Crossing cultural borders: Education for immigrant families in America*. NY: The Falmer Press.
- Elias-Olivares, L. (1970). Language use in a Chicano community: A sociolinguistic approach. In J.B. Pride (Ed.) *Sociolinguistic Aspects of Language Learning and Teaching*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Erickson, F. (1982). Talking down: Some cultural sources of miscommunication in interracial interviews. In A. Wolfgang (Ed.) *Research in Nonverbal Communication*. NY: Academic Press.
- Fishman, J.A. (1966). *Language loyalty in the United States*. The Hague, The Netherlands: Mouton & Co.
- Goodman, Y.M.; Watson, D.J.; & Burke, C.L. (1987). *Reading miscue inventory alternative procedures*. NY: Richard C. Owen Publishers, Inc.
- Marshall, J. (1985). Making sense as a personal process. In P. Reason & J. Rowan (Eds.), *Human Inquiry* (pp. 395-399). NY: John Wiley and Sons.
- Ruddell, R.B. & Speaker, R.B. Jr. (1985). The interactive reading process: A model. In Harry Singer & Robert B. Ruddell (Eds.), *Theoretical Models and Processes of Reading*, 3rd Ed. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Seidmann, I.E. (1991). *Interviewing as qualitative research*. NY: Teachers College Press.
- Silva-Corvalan, C. (1990). Contemporary trends in Hispanic and Luso-Brazilian linguistics: Part 2. Current issues in studies of language contact. *Hispania, 3*, 162-176.
- Trudgill, P. (1983). *On dialect*. Oxford: Blackwell.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Appendix A

MARY'S STORY

I went to school at San Jose Elementary. I didn't speak any English. I don't remember [the teacher] speaking any Spanish at all. I don't know how I communicated. I remember that for recess [the first day] I brought my lunch out because I was ready to eat. I was under a little bush, under a shade, then my brother came and he said, "No, it's not time for lunch yet. Go put your lunch back." And then he told me, "Come with me and just stay where I tell you." So he sat me down right in front of the flagpole and I stayed there during that recess and just waited until he told me it was time for me to go back inside the classroom.

The first time I was reading I think I was in 2nd grade. We would get into circles and when I knew it was going to be my turn I would count to see which sentence I was going to read. I would ask my neighbor [the words]. When my turn came around I'd just recite what he told me so I wasn't really reading. Then when I was 11 years old we moved to Los Angeles. I entered the 5th grade but I was very slow compared to the other children because I couldn't read well. I remember we were studying the United States and the different products and I had the hardest time understanding what the teacher wanted, where cattle were raised and cotton grown and things like that. I was able to finish my map but I was one of the last.

I do recall [the teacher] reading out loud and I looked forward

to that. I liked to listen to her read. That was the first time I recall someone reading aloud to me just for pleasure. No questions or anything. In 6th we had a Spanish teacher that came in once a week. That was the only time I had Spanish in school. I remember I got two words mixed up and the children all started laughing at me -- the two words are *infierno* and *invierno*, *hell* and *winter*-- I always remeber those two words now.

In the 7th grade I was placed in a slow reading group. It was only for the very slow readers and I didn't even do well in there. I was in junior high and I hadn't read a book cover-to-cover. All this time, I felt like I was hiding it. I didn't want people to know. I remember in my senior class, I was changed from--you know how in school they categorize you--well, I was changed to a higher reading class! That built my self-esteem and I guess it gave me a desire to go to college... I knew that I couldn't. When I graduated, I didn't even tell my parents that I wanted to go. I knew there was no money.

So I started working at a factory as a machine operator... Then I applied at the bank and I started working there. I could read and write Spanish a little then. Let me tell you how I learned. I married. I started reading my Bible with my husband and going to his church; it was bilingual but mostly Spanish. We would read [the Bible] in Spanish. He said, "All you have to do is say it and write it the way it sounds." I was working for [a] bilingual program, I would take some of my work that I couldn't understand and he would help me at home.

My son was 3 1/2 and he was not speaking so we decided that maybe I needed to stay home. I quit my work. We didn't know what the problem was but we guessed it would take a lot of my time to tend to. I just stayed home until my husband passed away... All along he would say, "You can go back to school." He was always encouraging me. Rogelio would tell me, "You're smart. You can do it." And that's what my plans were. After he was gone I was very depressed. My sisters were telling me, "Go to school, go to school." And I would say, "Si, si." But it was the farthest thing from my mind...

My son, he was 12 now, had had a problem reading since he was in the second grade. I didn't want him to be like me. We started getting tutors and enrolling him in special classes. After Rogelio died I was bringing Roger to a tutor at the university. She'd just tutor him for an hour. So I was walking and looking at bulletin boards when a lady came up and said, "Did you have an appointment? Did you want to talk to somebody?" I said, "No, I'm just looking around." And she said, "Well, did you want to be counseled?" That's when the ball started rolling, I said, "For what?" And she said, "Well, do you want to go to school or?"--the Lord gave me a little shove, that's what I tell my family--that lady tested me and advised me and told me how to register and everything. That's how I started to college! I want to get my degree in bilingual education. That's why I'm taking this Spanish class, to prepare myself. I know that I can help little Mexican children because I understand. I am one of them.

I feel more confident of going into the elementary schools. Right now I have three practicums and at the schools I go to, some of the children are bilingual and there are some that don't speak any English. I feel good about being able to help them. We're writing journals and there's two children that write to me in Spanish because they don't know how to write in English. I write back to these children in Spanish. The [group] is dictating to me and I'm writing what they dictate on large newsprint. I'm writing [the children's] words in Spanish, in their own language so they can understand it. I want to include them and so I'm already getting this out of my Spanish class.

The experience of taking this Spanish class is very good. Even though I could speak it, I couldn't write it. Now when I think about being able to read and write in Spanish, I feel like a more complete person. It makes me feel very close to my parents and grandparents. It's like it's a necessity for me to be a complete person to be able to write and to read in my own language.

I wish I had taken it earlier, let me tell you why. I took a history with Dr. Sanchez and [he] mentioned some Mexican authors and Mrs. Baca mentioned these Mexican authors in my Spanish class too. I could identify with them because they were not allowed to speak Spanish and how they felt. I think I didn't suffer as much, I know I didn't as much as they did because they really went through a lot. [One] young man had his clothes taken off and he was inspected

for lice at school on his hair and even on his private parts. Things like that didn't happen to me. But not being allowed to talk Spanish, I felt like I was being punished for something I didn't do. All the children still spoke Spanish on the playground but we knew we weren't supposed to... I see myself on the schoolground in the swings and we were laughing and speaking Spanish and the teacher came out and she was very angry with us because we were talking in Spanish. It hurt me because of the way the teacher was screaming at us... I didn't understand...

At home my parents would always speak Spanish and I was always speaking Spanish until we moved; I started speaking English then. The rest of my brothers and sisters did too. I think I was trying to fit in with the other kids in school. I wanted to get rid of the heavy Mexican accent I had. When I first moved here some children thought I was from Mexico--that's how heavy it was. I was embarrassed because it made me feel like I didn't know anything. I worked on it consciously to talk without the accent. I would try and think of what I was going to say and how it would sound; I would speak very carefully.

But the meaning of learning to read and write the Spanish, that's what I was supposed to be talking about today, right? It just makes me feel prouder. I don't feel bad saying I'm Mexican because I am--my roots are from Mexico. I am Mexican American... My education means my survival because I have to support myself now. And it

means fulfilling my dream. I had put it aside and now under very different circumstances than I ever thought of, I have come back to that dream. I'm determined to follow it to the finish. And it means becoming a complete person learning to write and read my Spanish and not be ashamed because I can't do it correctly. And it means being able to help little Mexican American children so maybe they will have better experiences in school than I did.